POETRY INDIA

VOICES FOR THE FUTURE

Edited by

H. K. KAUL

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Contents

Foreword		9
Preface		11
Introduction		13
I		
Shampa Sinha	Siesta	21
II		
Tarun Cherian	A Writer's Prayer	25
Ranjit Hoskote	Altamira	26
Anju Makhija	Can You Answer, Professor?	27
Oby Nagar	Sannyasini	28
K. Ramesh	Guns and Walking-Sticks	29
III		
Inder Bhasin	Snapshots of a Wounded City	32
Savitri Chandrasekhar	Somalia	35
Preston Devasia	Freedom	36
Shonali Ghosh	YO!	38
Ranjit Hoskote	The Murder of the Genie	40
C. Raju	To Wallace Stevens	42
Cedric Serpes	Synonym	43
Man Mohan Singh	Whom the Birds Loved	44
Shampa Sinha	Dinnertime	45
Neerada Suresh	Renovation	46

Foreword

One of the great pleasures of working in the field of cultural relations is to see a good idea come to fruition. Such is the case with the All India Poetry Competition, an idea first mooted shortly after my arrival here in India in 1988 and subsequently pursued energetically by Mr H K Kaul of the Poetry Society (India) and by my colleague Dr Neil Gilroy-Scott, who is responsible for our English Studies work in this country. The first and succeeding competitions attracted thousands of entries, the shortlisted poems were published in well-reviewed editions, and several of the winners have gone on to publish more substantial collections of their own work. It is not going too far to say that the competition has established a niche for itself in the literary life of India which is valued by aspirant poets as well as established practitioners.

The British Council globally has always attached great importance to encouraging emergent literatures in English and to supporting those which have already made their mark among the world literatures in English, as is the case with India. But the benefits flow in two directions and this makes the whole exercise doubly rewarding. The British poets visiting India to take part in the judging process carry back with them to Britain an increased awareness of the vitality of the Indian literary scene which they are able to transmit in various ways to readers there. A particularly fine example of this was the special Indian edition of **Poetry Review** produced by its editor, Peter Forbes, who was a judge in the third competition. This brought a wide variety of current Indian writing unavailable in Britain, to the attention of poetry enthusiasts who would not otherwise have had the opportunity. It is encouraging to see that the writing of poetry is alive and flourishing in India.

But judging any competition is a difficult task; and we should like to thank the judges for sifting the mass of material submitted, and for choosing, over the years, such excellent prize-winners and

short-listed entries. The partnership we have with the Poetry Society (India) in this event is a model of warmth and effective cooperation which we value highly. Now that my stay in India is coming to an end, I would like to thank my colleagues, especially Neil Gilroy-Scott and Ramanathan, for organising the British side of this collaboration; and to express my personal appreciation to Mr H K Kaul for the enthusiasm and vision he has brought to this competition.

My wife and I take with us the volumes of poetry, some of it unforgettable, that have been published as a result of the competition, as a warm memory of Indian poets. And I send my best wishes to the Poetry Society (India) for the future.

Robert Arbuthnott

Minister (Cultural Affairs)
British High Commission
British Council Division
17 Kasturba Gandhi Marg
New Delhi 110 001

Preface

The Poetry Society (India) and the British Council Division, British High Commission, have so far jointly organised four all-India poetry competitions. The first three competitions were organised in 1988, 1989 and 1991. About 6,700 entries were received from 2,400 poets in 1988. In 1989, 5,700 entries were received from 2,100 poets. And, in 1991, 4,000 poems were received from 1,250 poets. The shortlisted poems of the first three competitions were edited by me and published under the following titles:

Poetry India: Voices in the Making
Poetry India: New Voices
Poetry India: Emerging Voices

The successful completion of the first three competitions paved the way for holding the fourth all-India poetry competition in 1993. This time we worked with renewed vigour and tried to reach out to as many poets as possible through advertisements in newspapers, direct mailing and use of posters. We were happy to get more than 7,800 entries from 2,500 poets.

The judges of the competition were Mr. Lawrence Sail, Dr. J. P. Das, Mr. Nissim Ezekiel, Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra and Mrs. Sujatha Mathai. Dr. Prem Mathur, English Studies Officer, British Council Division and Mr. H. K. Kaul, Secretary-General, The Poetry Society (India), were the ex-officio members of the committee of judges. I am grateful to Mr. Lawrence Sail, Chairman, Committee of Judges and other judges for their help in selection. The following were the results of the competition:

First prize

Ms. Shampa Sinha
(studying in Australia)
for her poem *Siesta*

Second prize

Mr. Tarun Cherian (Trivandrum)
for his poem *A Writer's Prayer*

Commendation prizes

1. Mr. K. Ramesh (Bangalore)
   for his poem *Guns and Walking-Sticks*
2. Ms. Oby Nagar (Jaipur)
   for her poem *Sannyasini*
3. Mr. Ranjit Hoskote (Bombay)
   for his poem *Altamira*
4. Ms. Anju Makhija (Bombay)
   for her poem *Can You Answer, Professor?*

We are sorry to note that no translated poems got any prizes. The shortlisted poems have been presented in four sections in order of preferences of the judges and the views of the editor of the volume. The poems that received prizes are given in the first two sections.

I wish to thank Mr. Robert Arbuthnott, the Minister for Cultural Affairs, British Council Division, British High Commission, for taking a keen interest in this project from the beginning. I am also grateful to Dr. Neil Gilroy-Scott for being actively associated with the organisation of the competition. My thanks are also due to Dr. Prem Mathur and Mr. K. Ramanathan of the British Council Division for their help. I would also like to thank Mrs. Rajlakshmi and Mrs. Sudha Philips for their assistance during the competition.

10 October 1993 H. K. Kaul

Secretary-General
The Poetry Society (India)
L-67A, Malviya Nagar
New Delhi - 110 017.

Introduction

Indian poetry in English has steadily grown in form, size and content during the last four decades. The reasons for its steady growth could be attributed to a variety of factors. I have given them in my introduction to *Poetry India: Voices in the Making*, a collection of shortlisted poems of the first all-India poetry competition. Today, we are more concerned with the quality of Indian poetry in English than its quantity, which indeed is on the rise. It needs to be noted that neither readers nor critics are taking Indian poetry in English seriously. This is revealed from the meagre sales of poetry books in India and lack of good reviews in poetry journals abroad. This does not mean that the future of Indian poetry in English is bleak. In fact, this poetry has got its roots embedded deep in the psyche of poets from all walks of life. In their works, we find their rich experiences and their problems and issues highlighted in ample measure. Poems included in this anthology serve as good examples. It may be of interest to the readers of this anthology that most of the poems included here may not be perfect works of poetry and therefore may need to be improved further, but since we had to present an assortment of the shortlisted poems to the readers who wished to know what sort of poetry was being written today, we made this selection.

In order to get an overview of the kind of poetry that was generally being written in India today, I may draw your attention to a poetry workshop organised by the Poetry Society (India) and the British Council Division, British High Commission, in August 1993. It was conducted by Lawrence Sail, a well-known British poet and a judge of the All-India Poetry Competition, 1993.

Lawrence Sail remarked that though we came from different traditions of poetry, it was always good to accept honest and hard criticism, for it was only criticism that could help the poet in perfecting his art. He added that one could teach the craft of the art to a poet, but one could not make a non-poet a poet. One issue that was commonly noticed today was the absence of a standard form,

for poets were generally ignorant about its relevance. Mr. Sail felt that it was important for a poet to be adept in composing poems in different poetic forms, even though he chose to ignore all of them. He was welcome to do so, because it was he who was competent to take a decision.

Another important suggestion that was made was that one should avoid rushing to paper whenever an idea struck a poet. Mr. Sail felt that each idea needed to be incubated in the mind of a poet for quite some time, so that it came out in its perfect detail and rhythm. Today we are all hard pressed for time, and it generally happens that in a moment of tranquillity when an idea strikes us, we react to it and write it down. We feel that if we don't do this immediately, we may forget it as we get busy with some other activity. On the other hand, an idea that is important will continue to stay on in the mind of a poet once it has taken root. As it grows, it manifests itself clearly. Therefore, in this present time of activity, the poet can and should think about his concerns for quite some time.

It was noticed in many poems that poets state their messages so nakedly that their poetry loses its strength, images lose their relevance and the poems become statements of prose written in poetic form. They become too predictable. Poems have to reveal something more than they actually state and their messages should remain vivid between the lines.

It was also felt that intention, idiom and imagery were the three essential features that needed to be worked over in a successful poem. It was important that the poem revealed what it was about, for otherwise, it would lose its focus. It was important that the poet created poems that displayed his intention as it grew line by line.

The title of the poem should be sufficiently intriguing and the poet should be particular about using every word in the title as well as in the body of the poem. The poem, as it grows should unlock the title and reveal its meaning. The title may also have an ironic meaning.

Lawrence Sail in his observations during the workshop found the use of abstract expressions, unresolved conflicts, clotted grammatical structures, lack of clarity, ironic comments and lack of focus in some poems. Also, the absence of clear narrative structure

was noticed in the poems, where it should have been present. Some poems had very little to say or had very little poetry in them. As the poems presented in the workshop were by some known poets, I am sure you will notice in the poems of this anthology enough scope for improvement on one account or the other. Nevertheless, they are presented to the readers to let them get an idea of the poetry being written in English today. They are shortlisted from 7,800 poems. I am not commenting upon the poems, but would like to highlight the characteristics of a few.

It may be of interest to some readers, if I refer to a few poems in this introduction. Why does a certain artist create his work? Pramod Shankar asks this in *Question to an Artist Who Killed Himself:*

What is it that you seek,
you ask me.
Through trillions of chafed sunsets
robbing cake-shops
for crumbs with burnt edges
toe-nails splintered by coral reefs
slanting, sleeting rain boiling
on raw burnt tin sheets
and the smell of singed flesh?

And the life fades away in search of this answer. In *The Story of Her Life,* Nilanjana Roy compares himself with a naked bulb and describes its passage through time. At the end, though its relevance diminishes, its light still falls:

On dirty dishes,
stale messes,
yesterday's wastes,
and the dregs of life.

The images of cages and birds are nicely knit by Indrasen M. Jayakar in *Advice To Her Son.* She says:

Leave
The cage doors open
And let your ideas
Of birds sneak out.
Let them turn to birds
Moulting feathers.

A number of poems depict city life. Rajalakshmi R. Hebsur in *The Metropolis* gives a glimpse of the rush-hours in the morning in a city:

Then everything slowly settles down
to melt into a faceless anonymity.

Inder Bhasin in *Snapshots of a Wounded City* is surrounded by a multitude of images in Bombay, but in the end notices that everything is a *lafda* in Bombay and finally finds himself alone and homeless. S. Anand in *A Lyric for Curfew* describes how curfew in a city drags her to this idea of writing a poem, and after writing it, finally goes back to the city in a dream and notices that the curfew is still on.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra in *In Orissa* feels that with spring comes guilt. The guilt is surfaced by the sufferings in Orissa. For instance, he is sad to find slum women on sale. Nevertheless, he describes:

The spring's last days are my neighbourhood.
Light preens among the new leaves.
Wind is drunk with bird song.
Deep into the night dry leaves scurry
like memory. The moon
arrives a little later every day
looking paler, leaner and lovelier.

From Arvind Vamanrao Deshmukh, we get a host of images in *The Song of Darkness* where darkness is depicted. He finds a newly born stretching its shadowy arms, or the sea is swarthy for it breeds black fish that eat up the crumbs of light. Also, he notes:

The snakes of roads
Swallow the headlights
Like frogs.

Shampa Sinha in *Dinnertime* gives perceptive details of dinnertime discussion and table-thumping rhetoric that makes the plates quiver. Shonali Ghosh in *Yo!* reminds us how cruel we have been to the environment around us. How we pollute it and how unconcerned we have been in maintaining it well. She asks:

Where were you when the rain turned acid and sour?
And a tree lost its leaves and a plant its flower?

Cedric Serpes in *Synonym* shows how time takes life away from us and the world around us. Neerada Suresh in *Renovation* finds that her ancestral home stood like a country woman in modern attire. She recalls:

Where I had once dinned
playing dolls, blushed

to womanhood, stood
a kitchen smoking
flushing out
my adolescent fantasies.

Rani Day Burra in *Dedicated to Dorothy* describes how deeply she was obsessed with the thought of love even in her old age and would not mind marrying someone:

She sees it now, her father was strict
her hair's still in a ring round her head
But she doesn't think it's too late yet
For it's to the thought of Love she's wed.

Sonjoy Dutta-Roy in *To You Who Hold Me in Your Depths* finds the secrets in the eyes of his beloved, as the earth holds its roots, and the dark water, the hidden iceberg.
He says:

I know that as the sun's rays
sparkle and dance on its tip,
the iceberg hides deep
in the ocean's cold unfathomed depths
and gathers and grows.

Shampa Sinha in *Siesta* is in tune with her grandmother's tales. We also get the story of a woman in Preston Devasia's *Freedom* from her youth to her old age when she is haggard and desolate. Sudeep Sen in *Sati Revised* finds dowry deaths a common feature, with only a half-inch-column report in a newspaper.

Another body found next morning,
charred,
the pyre still warm.
another child, motherless.

K.D. Shroff also depicts a sad picture of a woman in *Born to Endure* :

Worn out and weary, for though I give life
and sustain it, my world is a man's world
I am silenced with fist and scowl and thundered
obscenities, for I am only a womb, I was born
to bear and to labour and to endure.

Oby Nagar in *Sannyasini* watches his transformation into *Moksha* by climbing the feet and arms of a sannyasini and finally reposing in her heart.

Many more sharp images and accounts feature in this anthology. Without going into more detail, let me conclude with the lines of Tarun Cherian who, in *A Writer's Prayer*, wants his words to sound like a lullaby rocking his child in its syllables, rippling like gentle waves in an ocean with no shores. He remarks:

Let my words have an unvarnished feel to them. Truth writ in the grain. Sentences that feel like bark and offer comfort like a bench after a long walk into the hills with a woman.

H.K.K.

I

Shampa Sinha

SIESTA

After lunch
when the flies had ceased buzzing
over the food-littered floor
and the air
was still and heavy
when only the soft plop
of drops from a leaky tap
into a half-filled tin pail
broke the quiet
my wrinkled grandmother
would ask me to comb
her long wet hair
and as the comb furrowed
through the dark shining mass
and the smell of her coconut hair oil
mingled with the warmth of
midday sunshine
her lips would tell me
of how an illiterate peasant
had obtained the gift of rhymes
from the Goddess Saraswati
of how the new-born Krishna
had escaped the wrath of
a jealous king
and of many other
such bygone things
I would look on
with sleep-drunk eyes
as she recited Sanskrit verse
in a grating sandpapery voice
and when
her eyes closed in comfort

and her breathing became as rhythmic
as the poetry she had chanted
through the long lazy afternoon,
I would tiptoe
upto the old wall clock
to see
if time had stopped.

II

Tarun Cherian

A WRITER'S PRAYER

Let my words have an unvarnished feel to them. Truth writ in the grain. Sentences that feel like bark and offer comfort like a bench after a long walk into the hills with a woman.

Let my words have the clearness of a stream — the seeing pebbles look. The kind through which you reach and pick a water-smooth pebble. Or better still, cupped in both hands, it's icy coolness splashed on a sweaty face and arms dewed with a laughing run up a summery slope.

Let my words have a good taste to them, like warm stew ladled with loving arms, brown-gold as loaves snoring-soft in a basket weaved hither-thither with sentences and bible rhythms and the warm taste of grace.

Let my words smell like the tenderness of a woman's breast or a cupped hand raised gently, its fleshy plumpness to nostrils trembling as a race horse's might. Or let the words breathe of iron-hot clothes, or a leather saddle, or a table being waxed by the arms of the carpenter.

Let my words sound like a lullaby, rocking my child in its syllables, rippling like gentle waves in an ocean with no shores.

Ranjit Hoskote

ALTAMIRA

Morning wells like blood
in the stag's hollow eye.

That horned fleece is yours, priestess;
this stone axe, mine.

I won't wear my minotaur mask again.
I've spent the night carving

this ring of bone for you :
print your palm in vermilion

on this rock-face and today
spouts of fire will drive the bellowing wind

mad. Your name swells
in my mouth. Stop me

with the bloodrush of your hair,
the long ripple of your spine.

Anju Makhija

CAN YOU ANSWER, PROFESSOR?

WHEN WERE YOU BORN?

Forbes dry gin, rum-flavoured pipe tobacco, sunflower seeds,
Mozart's Amadeus, Milton's Paradise Lost
the right mix for immortality... *a flap and the fly is dead.*

WHEN WILL YOU DIE?

Refilling the glass, lighting the pipe, peeling the seeds,
lulled by the music, flipping through Paradise Regained,
meditating on the bend of the leaf... *a flap and the fly is dead.*

YOU DO NOT KNOW?

Empty glass, pipe dangling, seed skins scattered
chanting a mantra, reading Path to Nowhere,
fanning the Guru... *a flap and the fly is dead.*

WHAT DO YOU KNOW THEN?

Gin twice a week, pipe alternate days, twelve seeds at lunch,
weekly concert, writing The Great Gibberish Novel
the right mix for immortality... *a flap and the fly is dead.*

Oby Nagar

SANNYASINI

Our eyes met
For a fleeting second
Binding us together
In a suspended animation
— That was my Yoga,

I, took a deep breath
And filled myself
With your fragrance
And parted with it
Miserly, slowly
— That was my Pranayama,

Once,
Sitting quietly
I recalled your smile
And tenderly it played
On my lips too
— That was my Dhyana,

A dear friend
Called me twice, thrice
Then literally, shook me up
As lost in yours,
I opened my eyes
—That was my Samadhi,

Creeper-like
I climb
Your feet, your arms
Craving for support;
To reach your heart
Where I'll repose
— That shall be my Moksha.

K. Ramesh

GUNS AND WALKING-STICKS

I remember an exhibition of
Guns of different sizes
Displayed on tables in a room.

Complete, dark in colour,
Shiny as the hides of horses,
And I loved to hold them in my hand.

The bullets too,
Beautifully shaped like
Small idols of gods;

The jawans explained about
Each to the men,
But I as a child just moved around.

I also remember the day
I saw in a shop,
Walking-sticks clustered in a basket;

One modelled like a snake,
The other stiff like a sentry.
The handles made me imagine

Thin men with bald heads.
But now I have grown up,
And I know well about the guns;

That each one is more horrible
Than the snake of Eden.
But the walking-sticks amuse me more.

And my wish is —
To find myself with one
(Walking-stick)
Sitting on the bench of a silent park
In the evenings

When I am old.

III

Inder Bhasin

SNAPSHOTS OF A WOUNDED CITY

A city less real
    than a Hindi film.
A city where,
    squashed in a speeding suburban train
    the existence of God
    is always in doubt.

Dilapidation
    in the Elephanta caves
A hundred-year-old building
    crumbles in the monsoon rain
Death and rebirth,
    reappearance of ruins
Remembrance
    of a road,
    a forgotten alley
A narrow lane,
    an ancient bookstore.
Translations
    of Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

The voice of K.L. Saigal
    singing, coughing, dying

A drunkard staggering at nightfall
    seeking a way home
And stumbling over rag-draped urchins
    huddled on the streetside.
Squalid slum-lined streets
    leading really nowhere

Voices of aged ancient poets:
    "The human spirit is indefatigable."

The scrawny face of an old Parsi man
on the balcony of
a decrepit building
in Opera House
Staring without expression.

Surreal City.

A discotheque on Marine Drive
The face of a woman
lit occasionally
by dancing lights
Shadows on the wall.
The dance of shadows
the music of echoes
Love and Death
Desire and Grief

The beauty of a sunset
at Land's End, Colaba
The beauty of a beggar girl.

Flora fountain sprouting
in the late night dance
of angelic statues.
The beauty of haphazard life.
The beauty of human survival.

Bewilderingly beautiful city.

Celebrations of the Unknown

God with an elephant face
Giant God on a park pedestal
Miniature gods on the mantelpiece
A procession of 10000 people
Dances of drunken day-wage labourers

Immersions of a 1000 gods
The Arabian Sea has a million
underwater gods.

The universe is unreal.

Prakriti: the complex molecule
of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen
In the caves, Brahma, Vishnu,
Shiva lie mutilated
amid heaps of garbage
strewn banana peels
empty coconut shells.

Maya shrouds my vision.

The city is lost,
I once viewed
from Mount Mary steps.
The taxi driver says
there is "lafda" again.
In Bombay, everything is a lafda
Love is a lafda,
Hate is a lafda
In the rear view mirror
Bombay recedes.

I am left homeless.

Savithri Chandrasekhar

SOMALIA

Food is thought.
It gnaws at your being,
eats you alive
Food is a dream —
Reach out with your hand
And feel your beloved ...
the desiccated body
holding back feebly
a hungry life
straining to get away
to a greener world.
Food is now a stranger
And now an enemy
Living is not important
any more
Death comes easy and quicker
But will the fat world
let you go?
You are the skeleton
in its deadwood cupboard
When you fall out
you will be the showpiece
of its oozing largesse
Food is a bitter pill
from sick to sick.

Preston Devasia

FREEDOM

All alone
curled up tight
on a shabby bench
tears falling
over dried cheeks
to muddy the floor

Nowhere to go
no one to care
haggard and desolate
how sad it is
to be old and a woman

A field laid waste
spent and used
thrown away
from heart and hearth
having outlived
smooth skin and working hands
crying unseen tears
so woeful a soul
that only Death can
with her gentle hands
offer comfort

The night is quiet
in its apathy
silence broken
by drunken singing
as merry-makers late
make their wayward way

A pack of dogs
hungry to tear
barking and baying
she steadies herself
on her wooden stave
as lean as she
to strike out hard
and make them scarce

From father
husband to son
handed over
three generations
then free
to be alone

Shonali Ghosh

YO!

Life is treating you right ; the future seems great —
A four-figure job — not much longer to wait
Till you get that promotion you're so sure you deserve;
After all, you've got grit ; you've got style ; you've got nerve.

The refrigerator's stocked, the cable's connected;
With 'Santa Barbara' on the air, Doordarshan's rejected;
With CD's available, two-in-ones are passe;
Move over, Ms. Paudwal, it's MTV's day.

From Gucci to Nike, you're in step with the times,
And you talk over cocktails on escalating crimes
In the city ; and you deplore the fate of the planet,
And wonder why on earth someone just doesn't ban it —

All this 'unenvironmental activity' and 'pollution'
And 'smog' and 'deforestation' — what's the solution
To the 'widening ozone hole' and the 'greenhouse effect'?
To the 'oil spills' and 'global warming' experts detect?

In your world of plastics you sit, quite satisfied
That you're doing your best ; that you really have tried
To make people aware of the knowledge you glean
From 'Time', 'Newsweek' and the idiot-machine.

But where were you when the earth was thrashed,
And the mountains were whipped, and the trees were lashed,
And the streams and the rivers and the valleys were bound
And were doomed to death ? Not a whisper, not a sound.

Where were you when the rain turned acid and sour?
And a tree lost its leaves and a plant its flower?

And the sun took on new and terrifying hues?
Where were you when the earth began to pay its dues?

Where were you when the condor became its own prey?
Where were you when the dolphin's smile began to fade away?
Where were you when the blue whale let out it's silent cry?
Where were you when the earth began to die?

Ranjit Hoskote

THE MURDER OF THE GENIE

Deep scar, the ash-white day
brands itself on the lavender walls:
the gulls strike deep
in crane territory.
A clock ticks in a robot head,
mindful of its destiny.

The fan spins till the breeze begins
to slap the blinds. In the squeeze between
iris and lid, the window feels
the first stir of unrest. And yet,
flight alone could not
have done it.

Who let the assassin spirit in?
Who armed him, who bailed him
out?
An inkpot drops on a sailor's head;
a letter comes to rest
in the cradle.

The mullions framing the gantry
ten miles away by skiff
are phantoms of mutiny
but don't show it.
They hold their pose with dignified presence
of mind. Nothing connects.

A parrot ransoms the clock for a song.
They repeat each other faithfully, translate
as two chiming alibis.
The curtains that shush the piercing needle

of the chime, part for the bulb,
that withered tiger's mask;

catching fire
even as the grammarian gropes
for crucial evidence, signs of a struggle
in the thick undergrowth of prescribed tropes,
routes, and the flowering false pretences
of language.

In the tanglewood, I leave a few odd cinders,
the spoor of a spangled maple, the trace
of a tune, an eyeful of pale water,
the guillotine of my feet.
Draw and quarter fact.
Fight clues with clues.

This wisdom shall be proverbial
in the room's unforgiving folklore.

C. Raju

TO WALLACE STEVENS

You were a talented
lawyer lacking in
self-promotion. You were
a stuffed goldfinch swimming
in rainbows. You were adding
scalp to scalp. What did it
matter if your 'Harmonium'
made a profit only
of six dollars and seventy
cents. With your signature
as puzzling as Chieftain
Iffucan, you sang in
heavenly labials
in a world of gutturals.
You enjoyed the green freedom—
a cockatoo dreaming
of baboons and periwinkles.
Long did you live aching
for the consummation
of the swallow's wings. Long
did you pile plums and pears
on a disregarded
plate. You lived in an old
chaos of the sun making
ambiguous undulations
on rainbow wings. You were
certain of uncertainty.
The green in your life left
you unconsoled. I have
looked thirteen ways at you
and do not know which to
prefer.

Cedric Serpes

SYNONYM

Time has altered
the rafters of this house.
The teak
has lost its marrow
and the walls have varicosed.

As a boy
I used to play on a rope-swing
strung from the door frame of this house.
The world jived
rushing to meet me
in one madcap dash.

Things have slowed down a bit now.
My swing has lost its momentum
and the door frame leans heavily on the floor.
Soon, the wrecker will arrive
        and blow by deliberate blow
        penalise brick, wood and stone
        into their elements.

Man Mohan Singh

WHOM THE BIRDS LOVED
(FOR THE LATE DR. SALIM ALI)

A washed saucer like sun
is pushed down by the evening song of birds
under the crumpled sheet of darkness.

Salim Ali returns to roost
forever to a nest fashioned
out of the straws of songs
and pieces of evening's last sunrays.

The white Siberian cranes from the cold North
join him in the drama of evolution
where new species are created and others vanish.
For extinction is forever.

Across the theatre of the Indian sub-continent
birds enact for him a hymn of praise
in their language of whistle and song.

As forked lightning swings
like branches of a tree against the blue sky
a peacock's shafted shriek
probes the abyss of darkness
in quest of Salim Ali.

Shampa Sinha

DINNERTIME

At dinnertime
the air heats up quickly
with isms and ologies
as husband, son, college-going daughter
dissect and debate
the affairs of the world
Hovering birdlike
serving spoon in hand
she watches them
consume portions of her
ladled out in generous helpings
Her fine-grained rice which
she spent hours scanning for pebbles
the banana flowers which
blackened her fingertips with their juice
Spiced by the pestle-ground mustard
which callused her soft palms
their table-thumping rhetoric
makes the plates quiver
she cautions the children
about their father's blood pressure
Any further interruptions to ask
whether there is enough salt in the lentils
or who will fetch the groceries tomorrow
would disrupt their discussion
of important things
none of which
she is expected to understand
Later in bed she may learn
from her husband's contented belches
he really enjoyed the lamb curry.

Neerada Suresh

RENOVATION

After renovation
my ancestral home
stood as a country woman
in modern attire.

Concrete walls impersonal
stood in place of mud walls
with memories
of late-night lizards
with kung-fu steps
trapping, lapping up dinners.

Where I had once dinned
playing dolls, blushed
to womanhood, stood
a kitchen smoking
flushing out
my adolescent fantasies.

Memories of childhood
grazed to the ground.
Rain spattered, sunbathed
bird frequented
corridors and courtyards
transformed
to closed-in concrete rooms
without a view
or a memory.

IV

Smita Agarwal

IN UTERO

My friend is a bitch
who doesn't believe
in contraception.
Should I tell you of
what happens when she's
about to deliver?
The sky recedes, the
wind stops; trees turn their
backs on her and walk
away. She then creeps
into a tin-box,
the lid falls on her.
My friend's aunt was
accidently shot
in the spine; she's
paralysed, waist down,
ever since. Aunt created
medical history
when she had her kids.
Aunt felt no labour,
only an ache that
split her head. So is
it with my friend. When
the pains lash her, mind
splits and hieroglyphs
crawl out of her cunt.

Smita Agarwal

TO GRANDFATHER — DYING OF CANCER

Old man, in your eyes
The pantomime of one hounded,
At bay, you wait for shadows
To lengthen; the close of day.
Coming up to me you want
To know what the doctors say,
Like the bitch who turns her face
From the weak one in the litter
I look away. You understand.
Your blood that courses through my veins
Will it flow slower? We both wonder.
I clutch you as I would a lover,
I embrace you as I would my son.
You disengage my fingers,
Slip down into your favourite chair,
And as always, we sit back and discuss
Politics, the weather, friends.

S. Anand

A LYRIC FOR CURFEW
(Alone in a Hostel)

There's curfew in the city
There's sun in the balcony
There's hunger in my belly
There's a song in my mouth

Now
there's a poem
in my hand

In my hand
the poem grows

I toy with two imaginary domes
but can break none

There's curfew in the city
    sun in the balcony
    hunger in my belly
    a song in my mouth
    a poem in my hand and
    now sleep in my eyes
    a dream in my sleep
    a city in the dream
There's curfew in that city ...

Rani Day Burra

DEDICATED TO DOROTHY

Her father told her
Painting is a minor art
Her father was a strict man
who worked in Post & Telegraphs.

Her father made her study Law
But she couldn't stand the sight
Of all those hapless prisoners
Who were sentenced for Life.

She fell in love with the Judge instead
But her father vetoed marriage
She spent her life cooking him
Vindaloo and sausage.

When her father died one sunless day
Her hair was stringy, grey
She bundled it in a ring round her head
And worked in the YWCA.

She fell in love with a married priest
But it was blasphemous she thought
So she changed her church and moved away
Not to incite a Man of God.

She sees it now, her father was strict
Her hair's still in a ring round her head
But she doesn't think it's too late yet
For it's to the thought of Love she's wed —

Forever
And forever.

Champak Chatterji

FINDING

In this
the hot breath
of black iron holes
of a smallpox summer
with unshadowed sun
on leafless ground
I found you
coconut water
Milk and flowing
I found you
Regret on shadow black skin
And
Glistening water-in-pitcher friendliness
I found you
Black eyes on a starless night
Full of flute
and rice pudding

Rimi Barnali Chatterjee

TIDES

The child on the empty street
Where two ways meet
Pauses under a street lamp
In the glowing damp
Of midnight as the moon shines,
A dog whines

A lost child
A moon unreconciled
To the dark
Gifting a spark
Down the sky's length
To the girl; strength
Touches a shoulder.
This moon, older
Than blood, drags its tides
After it rounds the sides
Of the aching earth
Travailing against birth.

The child smiles
The light reconciles
Strained rocks and strained flesh
Caught in the mesh
Of rending force
Around the moon's course.

Then the dark requiem
Sung by each beam
Of the blood moon
Child immune
Suspended in the flood

Between birth and blood
Moonless, yet to learn
How to build and burn.

Red light of the mind
Chasing its tail: defined
Helical progress of days
Through the dark maze
Forever two jumps ahead of the sun
O ruling one
Changeable face of time
Pockmarked with grime;
One side forever hidden,
One side forbidden.

Tarun Cherian

SPRING FORTH

Spring forth
and show your sap.
Unfurl the hand.
Spring tall the branching blood.

The sky be yours.
And this strange hour
where all strides forth
and ends.
Where seed births mountain.

Hurl forth your fury
against the pressing earth.
Heave your green shoulder
as if your life depends on it.
It does.

Nilima M. Chitgopekar

THE BABY

Her mother knitted.
Her visiting aunt knitted.
Their idle friendly neighbour
(roped in with flattery) knitted
All for baby yet to arrive.

Together they shopped
endlessly, shamelessly
for small bright coloured
plastic tubs
tiny undershirts
widely advertised mild powders
and a host of necessary
and unnecessary items
required for an infant.
They returned with auto-rickshaws laden
Never tired, never complaining.

Meanwhile, I regularly
'just' dropped in
which I didn't bother to do earlier
and succeeded, I think
in making suitable noises
evincing unfelt wonder, excitement
at the prices, the haggling, the quality
"A real steal," I said.

I hoarded fresh brooding material
as I thought
of the complete lack of enthusiasm
my mother
my aunt
my friendly neighbour felt
towards my pregnancy
seven years ago.

Arvind Vamanrao Deshmukh

THE SONG OF DARKNESS

Darkness copulates
With darkness
The newly born
Stretches its shadowy arms
Towards the parents
The swarthy sea
Breeds black fishes
That eat up the crumbs of light
The glowworms
On a tree of darkness
Eat of its fruit
And emit darkness
The snakes of roads
Swallow the headlights
Like frogs
The volcanoes erupt
Corrupt the milky way
The dark houses seduce
The half-lit streets
The angels of life
Sing hymns to death
The blind man reads aloud
The black print on black page
The stars of false hope
Twinkle in his empty sockets.

Joy Deshmukh-Ranadive

RESUMPTION

The picnic is over now,
Look for a clock,
There must be one somewhere,
Unclasp its hands,
Turn the wheel,
It is time to go back.

Put away the bedroom ceiling,
No more will morning stretch in slow awakening,
Fold up the living room floor,
It is no longer to be used for making love,
Dust the playfulness from the kitchen wall
Where you had cornered me,
I need to hang up spoons and ladles,
Shelve away passion,
There is plenty of empty space behind the rice,
and flour tins,
Pick up your exasperated laugh at my song sung off-key,
We need to talk about this month's expenses,
Brush my warmth off your lap,
You'll have office files to go through,
Wrap up the sunset with the moonrise,
I may be late from work.
Take one last look around.
Leave behind the lingering,
And don't apologise.
Not every couple gets two weeks of leave sanctioned,
Together.

Sadanand Dhume

WHO CARES?

Your mother dreams of madness.
Your wife walks away in love.
With the man she met in a public toilet.
Your father runs naked across a screen.

And you write.
Searching for a deep, dark honesty.
One untarnished truth,
on which to base your life.

A single truth so hard and pure,
that form will never matter.
Crushed like her flimsy nightdress.
Made vacant, obscure.

But that truth never comes.
You beg, you plead, you whine,
But in the end you are confined,
to the contrived sadness of your lines.

Sonjoy Dutta-Roy

TO MY SON AND MY POEMS

Why do I tremble
at the thought of sending you out
of my diary, my house and my soul?
Why does the world outside scare me so?
You will have to seek your place some day,

independent of me,
on a printed page, a classified desk,
free of my shadow and my doubts.

Perhaps I am afraid you will not fit
into the strict rectangular or cubical considerations.
You with your wayward innocent dreams
in a page, a room, a typewriter?

Can I take you to the mountains
and as the wind blows strong
set you free and see you fly
fluttering in a wild primeval dance
with the earth beneath, the sky above?

Why do I tremble at the thought?

Sonjoy Dutta-Roy

TO YOU WHO HOLD ME IN YOUR DEPTHS

"If I understood myself, I would have grasped the logos which is the real constitution of everything else as well."

Heraclitus

I know that as the sun's rays
sparkle and dance on its tip,
the iceberg hides deep
in the ocean's cold unfathomed depths
and gathers and grows.
I know that as the branches sway
and the leaves flutter,
unseen, the tree burrows deep
into the moist warmth
of the earth's labyrinthine depths,
mysterious and forbidding.

And I wonder
how much of me do you see,
how much of you do I see?

Will you ever know
where my root has branched off
and entered?
What new earth
the fresh roots will penetrate?

How many times
have I drowned in dark cold depths
to weep alone
and then emerge smiling,
tears washed by the salt ocean water?

And then I think of your eyes,
the secrets they hold.
Like the earth holds the roots
and the dark water, the hidden iceberg.

Kaushik Ganguli

AN ELEGY TO COMMUNISM

You were born one day,
in the British Museum,
in the mind of an impoverished German scholar,

And slowly, by degrees,
through the spoken word and written line,

You travelled through Europe,
to seize the fancy of one,
whose brother was hanged.

And finally, one October,
you seized the great land,
and enslaved it for five and seventy years.

You were the deity,
and many have been your high priests.
Slowly you seized,
one after another,
continents and great lands,
till half the world was locked in your embrace,
and red was the colour of hatred.

People have been killed,
Cities have been looted,
Innocents have been enslaved,
Lands have been denuded,
Rivers have been choked,
Mountains have been levelled,
Religions have been stifled,
Minds have been warped,
Walls have been built,
All because of You.

You have made the rich poor,
and the poor poorer.

You made mediocre societies, and
neglected your geniuses.

You made your high priests rich, and
you left your masses hungry.

You substituted bullets for bread and
screams for songs.
Now you are dead, with the stake of
free enterprise driven through your heart.

All your creations have turned to dust,
And the world breathes,
the pure air of freedom.

T.C. Ghai

AN ENCOUNTER

The signal was red.
A new space-age lapis lazuli automobile
Stood baulked:
The lady at the wheel
Young self-assured genteel
Hand on gear foot on gas
Eyes on the signal
Poised for a dash.

A short dark figure hobbled hither
Spread its naked stumpy palms
For alms
Thrust a cringing leprous face
Into the window case
And glared
Like a seventy-mm close-up.

The spark-plug air gap
Between the two faces
At perpendiculars
Tingled with megavolts:
The lady sat frozen
The figure stood breathing, gesticulating ....
To change over.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh

INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

Early morning, seated among many
like me, full of anxiety, agony and thrusted patience,
resting on the heartless slabs, all of us
fragmented hearts bonded with hope against hope
against the silent green walls, whom
I call not the witness of every element and event
but the cold plaster of a labourer's hunger, sand
and cement.
I hold my cup and sip my tea
concentrate more on the drink
than on the misery
my relative has been going through, the innumerable
syringes, salines, glucose, pills
to make him further suffer, further sink.

The door opens and a gentleman steps, clad in white,
out of an overnight's duty, not service,
in which he's tried to make life live, a soul fight.
Those dull eyes (ready for the situation)
announce the end of a long ago creation.

Another one
has joined the camp of the everyday endless.

Things could be worse, things are bad
life could be miserable;
this morning
it's only sad.

Rajalakshmi R. Hebsur

THE METROPOLIS

Dawn breaks through
the bristles of a
drowsy toothbrush
and slides
into a pasty morning.

A cup of tea
drained through
the bloody headlines
of a morning paper.

A working breakfast
stuffed into
not so brief a briefcase
Eyes rush down
the everyday road,
its dents, ditches and dips
as familiar as
the faces on the posters
of a lost election.

The old woman
ambles across
to the makeshift temple
to keep her appointment
with God.

Four and fifty steps
to the bus stop.
The world rushes
through a single door —
like strife in heaven.
Then everything slowly settles down
to melt into a faceless anonymity.

Ranjit Hoskote

ADDENDA

The red rag presumes the bull
when function tags after form.

Turn the tables so that the porcelain
may presume the bull, as the tea-cup does the storm.

A doctor a day might just as well pit
his feeble wits against fate by straining

to keep a hail of forceps away
from a pair of tonsils on a silver tray

as by hoisting a red sky the morning after
the sailor's warning. Don't say the song

didn't touch off the swan, or that you missed
the last pealing call of fish, egg, and teeth

before they passed forever from sight beneath
the herringbone textures of speech.

***

Strange ways the watchmaker winds us up,
with side effects for mainspring. We forget

what we know, and out of turn come up
with brittle hours, skeleton keys we never knew

we possessed. But turn them
when the dew papers the flagstones

and these keys release
a swallow that is all the spring we need;

a summer, thaw of colours
that have worked quite free,

as we have not, of words.

Ranjit Hoskote

APOSTROPHE TO AN ARCHITECT RAISING THE CITY OF GOD

Architect, how gravely you plot your weightless sections,
found a Republic

among the shelved elevations of a topography that banks in
puzzling segments of mortgage and ruin.

You sanction an austere axis here, commence
on a stiff oratory of grids;

ban vagrant shrubs from the avenues and square
the cracked colonnades in line with your prospect.

And let no catwalk trespass the majesty of the rise;
let drawbridges strike out, couriers of the perspective.

This record you trace, bears the watermark of fable.
In a mason's translation, it acquires a gloss of earthworks.

Its ammonia tints fade, its edges rot.
Brigands stalk the City of God.

Conquest and retreat. Condottiere priests.
No goldleaf glazes, but chalk encrusts

the stained palimpsest.
You fly the design you did your best to fix

but cannot escape the radii of that well-laid plan.
And harsh your own words of counsel scatter like tares

from a splitting pod:
bullets that sting your present tact.

Across the trade routes and warm currents, they give you chase.
Distance fails, and at the antipode, you pull up short.

And this is purgatory, an arsenal of sorts
where the flintlocks and mortars moulder, that first shot

the trajectiles of Hope and Reason.
Shadows on a damp verge of grass,

they mourn the remorseless tramp of the Idea in History,
sputtering, in deep old age, like aspic fire.

Ranjit Hoskote

FIRST SIGNS

Light scrapes the skin,
looking for the knobs of bones
like a language that has lost its grip.

And has to start over again,
looking for first signs :
a fork in the road, a bend in the river,
ash where lightning felled a tree.

It fastens
on the first coat of mould on a barrel left out
to the mercies of a cavalry of clouds. It fingers
flame scars brailled on the shoulders of cliffs.

No, not for it the snake that ruts
like a habit between the hillocks :

it must chew
on berries half-eaten by the old woman
with eyes full of eggs
and whispers.

And it must seek its horoscope
under the hood of a palm which throws
a sentinel hush
over crocodiles, boulders, philandering gods.

Like the swan in the ballad, the light
prays for a potion to fertilise
its phantom pregnancy.

***

Matted prodigal from grandmothers' stories :
midnight, a sibilance of moon and cicadas,
pours a cataract of rumoured images

over the edge — there's a river roaring in the gorge
which swills in swirlpools of phrases, foaming,
churning in all weathers; and spits out
dialect in a windjam of wings.

And then,
like a rifle nosing in the dark, a hand
opens a veined door in the shanks of the hills
to admit the two-tongued future

of war, the bitterest philology:
herald of shrapnel sense,
the living, the deadly verb.

Ranjit Hoskote

FURTHER ANNOTATIONS OF AN AMBASSADOR

I.
In this regime of urns,
I have become
a curator of epitaphs.

II.
The sun lisps after sprinting fences,
trying to stop them
from raking up gravestones.

Every weekend is a carnival
when the trees dance
in great, hurdling circles:

they shake the green toils
of railings and turnstiles
from a carpentered hypnosis.

And then the dead are no more safe.
They must collect their visas,
hemlock-stained,

stamped with arrowroot. The dead
do not follow dialectics. They only know
they must evacuate

their strafed valleys and villages,
crowding like nightgowns off a sagging line
into refugee camps.

III.
I ought to take a broad and cosmic view,
preserve the peace, reconstitute
the nations, erase dispute.

The Christmas recess. A temporary solstice
when my planet pauses for breath
on its swanflight from starburst

to sequel starburst. As it swoops
to play with fire, count the breaths
I take. Each breath,

summer sucks
the igloo poles like peppermints.
And the galaxies go spinning out,
homeless eskimos.

Ranjit Hoskote

RELIQUARY

This altar has sent up no smoke
in a thousand years.

We climb past spurts of grass, gulled turf above
the crypts of the bone people.

Nothing has changed the harsh ancestral faces
of the cliffs : they still spit in the eyes of the sea.

The turquoise wing, the whipping sail
brace this island against the spray

and salt that pit the clasps and telescopes
we've brought along like afterthoughts.

Loom and harrow give the stubbled rock roots,
net and needle ring it in;

the dolphin dives for sagas, the raven
is a black instinct. Together, we shall fill

sun in the reef's raging anchor-wounds;
together, we shall climb

to the charred brake
and kindle our nakedness.

Indrasen M. Jayakar

ADVICE TO HER SON

Don't catch the birds
and keep them
In a cage.

Cages are for birds
Not birds for
Cages

What you have
In the cage
Are not birds. They

Are your ideas
Of what birds are.
Birds are birds

Are birds. And what
Birds are
Can't be preserved

In a cage. Leave
The cage doors open
And let your ideas

Of birds sneak out.
Let them turn to birds
Moulting feathers.

Indrasen M. Jayakar

ALBERT EINSTEIN

You were like the others
Wanting a room to contain you
And all that you were cut out
To go unknowingly after. And
You wanted books to surround you
Or to fence you in within the precincts
Of a tradition. Like the others
You were also sufficiently eccentric
Wanting a small cubicle
With a large wastepaper basket
To relieve your brain in. You asked
For it all and got it:
That was a stroke of luck.

And when the event took place
Somewhere in the brainpulp
Of your very human skull
They had to confirm it
With experiments
Which not quite abnormally
Precede the occurrence.
No one really knows
Why someone chose your insides
To be the site of an insight
That would suddenly change the world.

You really seem helpless
Crying over a split atom—
Brooding over the moment
When your radioactive braincells
Had scorched the world to an atom.

You have made it small enough
For a man like you to live in—
Who was young, got married
Grew old, and played the violin
For a change.

Indrasen M. Jayakar

THE BIOGRAPHER

They knew he was a scholar
More than equal to the task
Of writing the biography
Of the 500-year-old warrior

They had worshipped and adored.
And they knew he would make him
More adorable than he was. So
They chose him. Set him up a goal

Which was more theirs than his.
And paid him in advance
For the resurrection of the man
Who had gatecrashed into their legends

Their aspirations and their dreams.
At a little more than seventy
The old scholar was harnessed
To bring a dead man back to life.

He began. Soon weaseled
Into the past. Dug out several
Facts and figures. And wiped them clean
Of all the dust and the legend

They had collected over the years.
With a confidence all his own
He walked 500 years back
To catch the idol of his people

Unawares. Stark naked and startled
He broke away from the body
Of one of his twenty-odd concubines
And looked the scholar in the face.

The horses he had mounted
Were nowhere in sight. And nowhere
The battle-scars he had contracted
In the legends. Only

The leprous wounds remained:
Those his women shared with him.
Th scholar left the scene
Walked 500 years again

To be back among the people
And make promises he knew
He couldn't ever keep. Before
The first word left him

About the other man's life
He died. And
The 500-year-old dead warrior
Survived him.

Reecy Johnson

SEPTEMBER-SYMPHONY

The incessant dripping of rain
Like a tune repeatedly singing
itself in the mind ....
The drenched day clings to the clothes-line
Remove the dried days
fastened together with thought-pegs
lest winds of change
send them billowing.

Mark off days
by the number of dead newspapers
piling up on the centre-table.
Days run into weeks
weeks collide into months ....
the year seemed new-born only yesterday
now eight months old
and wants to fly
even before learning to walk.

K.P. Joseph

CHRIST

What a phenomenon
is this man
who dies one day
and the other day
walks out of his grave
Every time he walks
out so, he is
put to death
and his words
shredded
once again
into brute alphabets

Every time
he walks out so
as from a car
or a caravan
he waves
to the multitudes
and stops at roads
to talk to those
who will listen.

He would speak
to them of peace and love
and the need
to offer the left cheek
when the right is bashed.

The crowd would seem
to understand
and even the rulers

pay him regard
noting down
his rising power.

But a day would come
when he would
cross the line
that the rulers
set for him
to hedge himself in
Then they would
arrest him and try him
for sedition. Sure
he would be found
in the wrong
and be crucified
gassed or shot dead
or condemned to
the electric chair.

K.P. Joseph

THE STONE

The stone is time
in a frozen state.

Within it
an ocean may slit
itself up
to mate with the sky.
Or the stone
at one time
might have been
a thumb-sucking star
in the stellar cold
crying to God.

Or it might have been
the gas in space
that inhabited
acres of light
wanting to shrink
into manageable size.

Now before my eye
lashed by sun
and rain it waits
oblivious
of the silent
orchestra in its
own pubic
to empty itself
into another eternity.

R.H. Lesser

THE OLD MAN

Are you listening, Time,
you whom death pays,
in your deep, full chime,
to tell out my days?

I have passed the door
where the lovers throng;
I will pass that way no more —
I am not young.

Those whom I loved have passed,
the ways they trod
are muddied and begrassed —
they are with God.

The lips I kissed now are
the roots of grass that sighs
as the wind in its listless tour
slowly dies.

The eyes that were bright with tears,
that loved the day,
now mingle their hopes and fears
with rude clay.

All that is left of their breath
is a soughing through a tree
that tells me the warrior, Death,
is soon for me.

Prabhanjan K. Mishra

IN ORISSA

The spring's last days are my neighbourhood.
Light preens among the new leaves.
Wind is drunk with bird song.
Deep into the night dry leaves scurry
like memory. The moon
arrives a little later every day
looking paler, leaner and lovelier.

Peasants dream of the jade-green crop
and the silver fish, and of ploughshares
sighing on the soft mud.
But the dwindling nights suffocate,
the mute trees thirst,
sweat breaks out signalling a ruthless summer.

Scrawny men pull rickshaws
on rickety roads.
Their laboured breaths
grunt in empty stomachs,
the tired legs weep for reprieve,
but their taciturn backs know
that bread comes from crushed bones.

In slums women sell themselves.
Sullen kerosene lamps
dangle from the posts outside their huts.
The flames jerk like necks
in the hangman's noose.

The spring looms in my guilt.

Christopher Robin Mitra

TO MY MOTHER, IN HER ANGER

For you to merely stamp your feet
And tear your hair
And swear it is forbidden
Will not do
Show me first your reason
Let it stand against mine
And prove itself the stronger
I will submit to its power

In the end it's each of us
To his own crutch
Lame, blind and uninspired
In a demanding age

My eyes too, will one day open
Like a flower to the sun
And then wither in its heat
And then when we meet
We will have agreed that we saw
And that the colour of our eyes
Was somehow unimportant.

Aldous Mawlong

THE QUEST

I can see
beyond the dark waters of your eyes
into your mind
where exists a tangled maze
of fossiled thoughts and frozen voices
unreachable by man.

Your emotions
are a journey on a tumultuous sea
prying into the distant, unchartered horizon
of an unknown tomorrow.

Tonight
I touched your fragrant body
and felt the numb sensations awaken
as you unlocked yesterday's ghosts
and quest for a reconciliation:
with whom, with what,

I know not, but this
that you will persevere
even unto the end...

Mahesh Nair

A TRAVELLING SALESMAN OFF-DUTY

The rains have come again.
Wetting nights with the smell
Of woman... the musk-warm rose
pressed to my lips, a homecoming
Memories ago. Cigarettes, sweat, petrol,
Leather, highway grime and God knows
What else — One hand clawing
At my crew-cut, the other
Groping for the necktie-knot—Don't you
Dare come near me before you wash
Next time, next .. time ... next.... and
The rose bloomed, moist with bittersweet dew.

Ram nam sacch ho, Ram nam
Sacch ho*..... Saffron-smothered,
Cotton-plugged against the fumes
Of incense wreathing you ... You? I stood
Afraid to come too close, still
Dripping wet from the dip
Next time.

And the rains
Have come again, washing
Winds clean of the sighs
From the slaughterhouse down the street
They sell hardware in shops, and red meat
In the alleys under the yellow light — Get on
On wi' it, don't take so long... what
D'ya want?. ..Love!? ...y're drunk! Get
Back home, go back t' y'r woman....

Tomorrow, this city leaves me too.

*The chant heard during a funeral procession.

Jaishree Nair

FOR ROHINI, MY HANDICAPPED CHILD

My daughter
Two, a long time ago
Will be forever
Forever two

I wonder
When, when will you grow up
My darling, will you
Grow up at all?

I've saved up
So, so much to tell you
Laughter and tears for
When we can talk

There's a world
A world I must show you
Both happy and sad
When you are grown

I need you
I need you beside me
Healthy and sturdy
A potential best friend

So I'll wait
I'll wait without tiring
Waiting and watching
For you to grow

For if I,
If I tire of waiting
Of praying and hoping
Whom will you talk to
When you are grown?

Pamela Poulose

YOUR WIFE

I have lived in your kitchen aromas
Far too long
What do I know of the aromas of air....
I'm no bonny bride
Just a bowl of beaten rice
Whipped for your palate
Who serves and is served...
Every night after dinner,
I froth under your tumultuous desires,
The seedy deeds of a man and wife...
And when your need is done
You toad away, to the study,
Not a word between us
But one son...

Anmole Prasad

LOVE! POEM

You are
giant pylons
striding in the dusk
train's cry
arced across the night
a blues harp
bent to a B-flat
to me
all these things
you are

Anmole Prasad

OLD TRUCKS

Sometimes I see
old trucks stalled
on the national highway
splayed
over a pool
of diesel
like a beaten bullock
urinating
between legs too tired
to carry it
even to the butchery
at Gangtok

A. Radhakrishnan

ETERNAL WOMAN

Her tresses, shampoo strengthened
reached behind her, down to her hips
covering her shoulders, enveloping her
as if it were a cloak

the receding rays soon winked
the children's chatter announced
their home-coming from school
breaking her from her reverie

soon the better half, her man
would be home too,
bellowing for his dinner
talking with typical male chauvinism

half-smiling, she turned to prepare dinner
thinking of ambitions nurtured
of being a manager, a businesswoman
but marriage, eight years of it
and three children to boot
had put 'finis' to it.

so back to the pots, pans, masala and mixie
cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, bargaining
saving, managing purse strings
mother, wife, daughter in 3 stages of life

time to sleep, she espied
her husband, passion filled, romantic
impatience showing slowly on his handsome face

as she walked towards him, she thought
a new morrow, the same game—day in and day out
but nevertheless, she had no repentance, no grouse
her family compensated
that was she — the eternal woman!

C. Raju

SOMETHING REFUTED...

He was an open window
starved of reflection. He
was like the moon, a silent
witness to the shore being
gnawed by the sea. He wished
he could become Pethidine—
antidote for sorrow. But
claws scraped the window sill
demanding attention.
He longed for salamander
words. When life became a
single vowel without
a consonant no
antibiotic could
protect him. With spondilitic
pain he limped through his part
with an obsolete heart,
She had become an old
migrane and he had become
one of the twice-dead. He
had longed to plant orchards
in her face but her face
was ever frozen. Her
kisses were quartz defying
petals. Kisses and petals
fade in pursuit of different
shores. He said his prayers like
a disciplined clock blurting
out its fixed syllables.
Thank God there was a
horizon beyond one's reach.

K. Ramesh

AFTER WRITING A POEM

Living alone in my room,
With whom will I share
The silent cry of joy
After writing a poem?

Should I have to wait
For my friend who
Would come the next morning,
Or step out into the night

And read it for the myriad
Stars twinkling in the sky?

K. Ramesh

WAITING

From now onward
I will wait;

Not like a child
Waiting impatiently

For his father
Who brings gifts,

But like the tall trees
In silence at night.

Like the sole tree
On the mountain

Waiting in the darkness
To face the sunrise.

Shalini Reddy

THE GLASS SLIPPER

At the stroke of midnight,
the moment of truth
When the white horse turns into a mouse,
The coach to pumpkin;
The satin dress to rag
and dreams to cinders.

- 2 -

The clock is relentless,
His hands can never be bribed
Neither with power nor money;
And as it ticks on,
So she escapes from him
Her very own prince,
Across the palace's marbled floors;
Down the stairs —
Just as one glass slipper turns to naught,
The magic is about to be gone.

- 3 -

Then, rare truffles turn to plain toadstools
Vintaged wine of value to rainwater;
Kings turn to cabbages
And saints step back into the woodwork
Then, it's the moment of truth
At midnight.

Nilanjana Roy

THE STORY OF HER LIFE

I was a naked bulb
Brilliant and piercing
With a bright future before me.

I became a lamp
enclosed in a silken shade
beautiful, decorative
I lay in a corner, half-forgotten
gathering dust
my waning light shadowing my life
Until I crept out.

How fashions change!
Around me I see
new lamps in the world
With brighter shades and dimmer light
glowing more proudly than I ever did
"What about me?" — I cry.

I am still wanted—
in the kitchen.
My light falls
on dirty dishes,
stale messes,
yesterday's wastes,
and the dregs of life.

I am again a naked bulb
lighting up from day to day
with my future behind me.

Sudeep Sen

DADU

Three years back I held Dadu, my grandpa, through
the second attack in the Intensive Care Unit,
surrounded by smells of doctors, dis-
infectants, drugs, and his sweat,
as he convulsed fiercely fighting for life.

I held him all the way through,
watching the beads of his sweat
glisten among the neon-lit
panels, pipes, pins, graphs, glucose,
as he cried out breathlessly for life.

The dreaded moments, struggling, gasping to
live. I was just as drenched as he was. I saw:
His eyes closed, he lay there silently with his
heaving chest rise and fall
as all the sweat beads rolled down his sides.

He breathed back, barely, to
yet another survival.
I was not present there, this
time. Trying to hold him again
from ten thousand miles

away, I overheard by mail: Didu,
my grandmother, absolutely cold, choked, pale,
spoke the only words she's spoken since,
"All our grandchildren except you saw him,
you weren't here, to save him, this time."

(for Didu) 1988

Sudeep Sen

GOVIND DEV TEMPLE

Pink-buttocked monkeys leap from one lichen-layered eave
to another, as the parrot's plumage splash the deep red
of the wall green in patches, resident bees drone
from the hives stuck to the ceiling, and the screeching
bats echo flying in and around tracing arced orbits.

Govind Dev stands steadfastly, propped with monumental
blocks of red and ochre sandstone, where solidity and finery
of architectural execution are married in an art,
both Islamic and Hindu, high on the hill in the centre of
Vrindaban rising above everything that is around.

In 1590 when Emperor Akbar's general Man Singh
supervised its creation, his cavalry bowed as they marched
past this splendour on the hill enroute from Delhi to Agra.
Now, the surrounding tenements invade, inching their way into
every square of the courtyard space, and the pilgrims' walk.

Here, under the old sanctum, Krishna's idol was found,
celebrated, worshipped, *rasa-lilas* sung by Chaitanya,
his followers, and people. Through four hundred years
generations of devotees, bats, parrots, and monkeys
have lived here, prayed here, and changed hands,

but one fact has remained constant:
Every year, on the night when the moon appears full
for the first time, its incipient rays streak through
the main archway lighting Krishna's forehead faint blue,
and the empty temple halls echo—*"Radhey, Radhey."*

Sudeep Sen

MUGHLAI GHAZALS

I will enjoy the taste of this warm bread,
Hinting at bitterness beneath the edge.

P. Levin, *Indian Restaurant*

Whenever I sniff the smell of leavened *naan*
these days, or palette a plate of *daal*

makhani or chicken tender in orange butter,
I cannot disassociate myself from *ghazals*

sung out of tune, tunes which sound alike
every time you taste the taste of *Mughlai.*

Have all these crooning courtesans who belt
out numbers like customers who order warm bread

in numbers lost their subtlety
that food and music possess? Their novelty

now will never be the same with plastic
primroses, and nylon capes, and the caustic

coarseness that rustle new-fangled currency.
They have nothing really, beyond the buoyancy

of emptiness, not even the taste to teeth
or savour the delicate bitterness beneath

the floured edge, but only singed sensibility.

Sudeep Sen

SATI REVISED: A PLAY IN TWO ACTS

the young woman in the yellow sari
shrieks as her man beats her.
she struggles, helplessly.

just as the final act reaches
its last lines
another woman enters,

his mother, maybe, soaks
the yellow sari brown with kerosene.
someone, who always escapes

unnamed, lights a match.
shrieks, and more shrieks,
as she flames,

fighting the lapping tongues
of the ritual fire
another body found next morning,

charred,
the pyre still warm.
another child, motherless.

the only reaction,
a half-inch column report,
in its usual spot in the newspaper:

another dowry death,
name, age, and nothing more.
life goes on, unmoved.

the curtain falls, the pulleys creak, resisting.

(for my neighbour's wife and many like her)

Anasuya Sengupta

MONSOON LOVE

It is easy for a woman to give her love
Like the monsoon rain
In heavy torrents of gratitude
And pain
And longing
Till the earth grows tired of the burden
And returns to its summers.

Pramod K. Shankar

QUESTION TO AN ARTIST WHO KILLED HIMSELF

For a moment and a half,
you cling;
fingertips digging the precipice
of my skull
and as I close my eyes I see a kid
drooling in the ecstatic oblivion of madness.

What is it that you seek,
you ask me.
Through trillions of chafed sunsets
robbing cake-shops
for crumbs with burnt edges
toe-nails splintered by coral reefs
slanting, sleeting rain boiling
on raw burnt tinsheets
and the smell of singed flesh?

Masked trapeze.
Springing up from the safety-net
the Big Top
ring-masters with cigarette-holders
a mile long
and pointed, pronged tails.

Why is it that you paint your face,
you ask me.
With white and vermilion
and a grin with curling corners
and the skull of a mouse for a nose?

Why is it that you
paint?

Katayun D. Shroff

BORN TO ENDURE

Aeons of trial have taught me patience
and endless endurance, to whom should I
complain, prisons have no ears. I am a woman.

I was born free, like the tigress in the wild, in me
is wound up the coiled steel of the tigress,
she that bears maneaters. I am a woman
to me are born men. Such is my travail, that the
earth must shudder when I throw forth a man-child
feeling lightning terrors within me, to be brought
back from the brink of darkness and of hell.

I rise before the birds to slog bow-backed, long and hard,
the last to lower myself upon my reed mat.
I cover scorched miles under a hot sun that blasts
all that it touches. Hardship has not broken me
but stiffened my spine. Yoked to a man, I return
to light his hearth, where all is his and nothing mine.

I eat after I have fed them, him and his people,
scraping what remains, and I dream
of my own village while they sit out there,
these men, making small talk, squirting tobacco juice,
laughing, drawing contentedly at their cheroots
their work done. My work is never done.

I must wash and sweep and put away,
must lay their mats so they may sleep,
I must tend their young, must comfort old bones,
I must give of myself completely, with none to care
if in the giving I lose myself in entirety.

Worn out and weary, for though I give life
and sustain it, my world is a man's world
I am silenced with fist and scowl and thundered
obscenities, for I am only a womb, I was born
to bear and to labour and to endure.

Neerada Suresh

ENCROACHMENT

One evening after work
groping in the mailbox
for messages, letters from nowhere,
my fingers encountered
sprigs, twigs and eggs.
A bird had nested
right inside my mailbox.
Annoyed, I cleared it all
except for the eggs.
Later in the evening
A squall had me out
hastily gathering, clothes left drying.
In the garden, hopping
in clumsy hurry, was a mainah
balancing in its yellow beak
twigs and slender sticks
heading for my mailbox
laboriously to rebuild
the cosy nest I had wrecked.
My vision blurred in the heady showers
The message I had missed
Quite clearly I read
In the incongruous nest
hidden in the wooden box.
A trespass, an encroachment
that escaped prosecution,
A slow persecution
through a denuding of its habitat
leaving no room to nest
Except in wooden post boxes
nailed to concrete walls.

Neerada Suresh

'KHARAV'*

He had risked it from Kashmir
A trip to New Delhi and back
To meet his master
Mistress and children.
I received him at the station.
The years had rollercoasted
Through his frail frame
His eyes still held
That little boy's look....
The tea in the samovar.
Quietly embroidering under a chinar
Picking peaches and plums
And hauling children from the orchard
The daily Namaz....
Master, I miss you
When will you return?
And the children?
Routed, rooted
They had scattered
To US, to Australia.
But I hope to return, I said
Master, when you parted
The carved Kharav you gifted
I still cherish. It lies buried
Two feet underground
Lest they accuse us of theft
When our houses get searched.
At times, I view them at night
In candle light.
Master, when will you return?

* wooden sandals

Neerada Suresh

MY HOME

A rambling one
on a sprawling land.
A verandah with an armchair
the domain of father
where he dozed
over newspapers,
planned our futures,
held in check
the children of the household.
Inner rooms
doubling as study and bedrooms.
A courtyard—
smelling of jackfruits and mangoes—
with crevices for scorpions
crawling out gleaming after thundershowers,
for paper boats and starry nights
for mother to dry out
her jasmine-scented hair
and pickles.

One by one we left.
Married to men
who took us to cities, to apartments
with drawing, dining spaces
cubicle kitchens,
bedrooms with toilets.
Our souls trapped in cement casings
we pined
for those mossgrown places,
rain splashed courtyards
in our treeladen home.

Pushpinder Syal

SEARCH AT DAWN

They ring the bell at dawn, ripping apart
the dense fabric of my dreams.
They're searching for a terrorist—
they think he's hiding
in these houses somewhere. And as
they tramp up and down the stairs,
suddenly, I'm the one they're looking for
the people shielding me whisper
to each other, then hurry to the bed
which I had been given at midnight
when I snuffled at their door;
they gesture to the children's room,
there are some trunks there, hide behind them.
The light flashes on the children's bodies,
on the trunks, they look around
not knowing that the human form crumples
into a shadow, into a darkness that sees
them go; and the children
like fragile grass growing
in realms of gunfire,
with a killer only two feet from them,
sleep on.

Minoo Vania

BLOOMS AT MIDNIGHT

There surely must be
A reason why
Some cactus flowers bloom
Only in the dark.
It may be because of
The harsh heat of the day
Or the searing winds.
It could even be
That cactus flowers are shy,
Not wanting to be seen.
I wondered about this
For many years, my friend,
And then suddenly I knew
Why these exotic blooms
Appear only in the dark.
It is because each flower
Is crafted by celestial beings
Who work only at night
When they can weave
The softness of moonlight
Into these flowers
And ere the sun rises
The craftsmen and their craft
Can both fade away
So that their secret remains,
For some other dark night
When they create their magic again.

R. Vasu

THOUGHTS IN FLIGHT

Butterflies are beautiful
But not in one's stomach!

Most accidents take place on the ground,
Or, reach there....

One is static
with respect to the aircraft
As well as one's mind.

The hum of the engines
Does not let one
Hear the silence.

The seat belt fastens one
To a moving object
And prevents one
From becoming one.

Who says the earth
Looks green from the sky?

It looks like a mass
Of grey paint
Suspended in water.

In fact, one feels
One has left
All the grey matter behind!

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This volume of the prize winning and shorlisted poems has been edited by H.K. Kaul, himself a poet, critic and Secretary-General of the Poetry Society (India). He has been the Editor of *Indian Author*, the Project Director of many literary projects and Course Director of Workshops for Afro-Asian Writers sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. He is the author of nineteen books, which include *The Deep Seas, On the Waves* and *Poetry of the Raj*. Presently he is the Librarian of India International Centre, New Delhi and Director of Delhi Library Network (DELNET).

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